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Exploring the Relationships Among Hurt Reactivity, Social Adjustment, and Psychological Well-Being

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ABSTRACT - Hurt feelings involve acute emotional responses and can be expressed in one of two behavioral patterns: introjective and retaliatory. The present study assessed the convergence of introjective and retaliatory hurt and intra-and-interpersonal functioning among 141 college students. Results revealed that both introjective and retaliatory hurt reactivity are associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression and lower levels of global self-worth and social acceptance. However, retaliatory as compared to introjective hurt better explained depressive symptomatology; whereas introjective hurt was a better predictor (inversely) of global self-worth and social acceptance.

Keywords:

Hurt feelings;
Introjective vs.
retaliatory responses;
Emotional reactivity;
Depression and
anxiety; Self-worth;
Social acceptance

Introduction

Hurt feelings are an inevitable part of human relationships, involving acute negative emotionality and have been conceptualized as feeling emotionally injured or harmed by another person (Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Sprague, 1998). Specifically, hurt results from perceived interpersonal transgressions, such as rejection, threat, or frustration and is related to feelings of despair, anger, and guilt (Fine & Olson, 1997; Jones & Burdette, 1994; Jones, et al.,

ISSN:
1541-745X (Print)
2169-3951 (Online)

Editor's note: This article is a reprint of an original work published in 2007 in *Psychology Journal*, Vol. 4(2), pp. 58-58.



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1991). Despite the prevalence and presumed importance of hurtful experiences in everyday life, very little research has addressed the impact hurt feelings have on the individual and his or her psychological well-being.

Recent research suggests that having one's feelings hurt is detrimental to the hurt person's self-esteem and damaging to relational stability (Leary et al., 1998). According to the sociometer theory proposed by Leary and Downs (1995), state self-esteem acts as an internal gauge that automatically monitors the social environment for cues denoting interpersonal rejection, disapproval, or exclusion and triggering negative affect (i.e., hurt feelings). When such cues are detected, they impel the individual to engage in reconciliatory behaviors in an attempt to restore his or her social acceptance (Leary et al., 1998; Nezlek et al., 1997). In this model then, hurtful experiences trigger the perception of relational devaluation, or the recognition that another individual does not regard his or her relationship with the person to be as esteemed, close, or important as the person prefers (Leary et al., 1998).

Moreover, the extent of hurt feelings are theorized to result from the affective component of the sociometer, suggesting the more negatively evaluated, or socially rejected one believes oneself to be, the more likely he or she is to experience negative affect. In fact, hurt feelings and feelings of rejection appear to be related in a circular fashion (Leary et al., 1998; Negel, 2002). The events that cause hurt feelings invariably involve real, implied, or imagined interpersonal rejection; and, conversely, the degree of hurt one experiences is related to the degree to which he or she feels negatively evaluated or excluded by another individual or group. The more one experiences rejection in their interpersonal relationships, the more likely he or she is to develop low trait self-esteem and an increased awareness, or sensitivity, to cues indicative of social exclusion (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Thus, such individuals are more prone to develop oversensitivity to hurt, which may lead to social withdrawal. Previous research has shown that trait self-esteem moderates individuals' reactions to social inclusion and exclusion (Nezlek et al., 1997).

Research also has shown that exaggerated responses to interpersonal transgressions are related to forms of psychopathology (Blatt, 1974; Blatt et al., 1976). Additionally, the pattern by which people respond to others has relevance for sub-clinical issues of individual and relational adjustment (Nezlek et al., 1997). Specifically, hurt may be used to rouse others' feelings and displace emotional distress. In such an instance, the hurt individual may choose to lash out, inflicting hurt on his or her partner and thereby increasing the probability that the hurtful experience will negatively impact the relationship. In other circumstances, people may choose to withdraw from social interactions in order to avoid the hurt that they have come to expect in their interpersonal relationships.

In this regard, Blatt's (1974) delineation of depression in the clinical literature is particularly noteworthy. Specifically, he proposed that depression may be broken into two dimensions: (a) anaclitic depression, which is characterized by dependency on others for support and gratification, and (b) introjective depression, which is denoted by self-criticism and feelings of self-doubt and guilt. The anaclitic pattern often involves difficulty in managing anger and aggression for fear of losing or destroying the object of one's affectionate-need and the satisfaction he or she provides; whereas the introjective pattern involves constant concern and vigilance for

disapproval and rejection and thus a heightened tendency to assume blame and responsibility and to be harshly self-critical and self-punitive (Blatt, 1974; Blatt et al., 1976).

This depression typology may be viewed as potentially describing two patterns of responding to hurt feelings, indicative of the range of possible responses to experiencing hurt (Negel, 2002; May & Jones, 2005). Specifically, some people tend to internalize their hurt, thereby exacerbating it and engaging in self-blame, denoting an introjective hurt dispositional style. Other people have a tendency to lash out angrily and aggressively toward those whom they perceive as having hurt their feelings, which is representative of a retaliatory hurt disposition. Thus, the experience of hurt can be categorized into two distinct dispositional patterns of reactivity: introjective hurt and retaliatory hurt.

Using the bimodal model of hurt reactivity (i.e., introjective and retaliatory hurt; Negel, 2002), the present study sought to explore the relevance of these two dimensions to individual adjustment and psychological well-being. It may be that those who experience introjective hurt are at greater risk of developing self-esteem problems and depressive symptomatology as they internalize the hurtful experience and compound its self-effacing negativity. Those who experience hurt in a retaliatory manner, on the other hand, may fare better in this regard as they tend to react externally to the hurtful episode; by venting their anger and pain overtly, they experience a degree of emotional catharsis that allows for a partial, if not complete, resolution to the hurtful experience. In either case, the hurt experience has a significant impact on both the individual and his or her relationship with the offending other.

The extant literature assumes that hurt is experienced temporarily and typically connected to a particular event or interaction (Leary et al., 1998; May & Jones, 2005); however, few studies have explored the possibility of hurt feelings as having more enduring consequences. Given that over-sensitivity to hurt has implications for psychological well-being and relational adjustment, the aspect of hurt feelings that may be of particular importance is the manner in which a person characteristically reacts to and copes with interpersonal hurt, further suggesting the need to empirically investigate individual differences in hurt disposition as they pertain to individual outcomes. Thus, the purpose of this study was to assess the implications of introjective and retaliatory hurt dispositional styles for one's psychosocial adjustment. Specifically, we explored the idea that both introjective and retaliatory hurt tendencies would be associated with indices of problematic intra-and-interpersonal functioning (e.g., global self-worth, depression, social acceptance, and social phobia).

Method

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and forty-one college students (112 women and 29 men) participated in this study in exchange for nominal course credit. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 48 years of age with a mean of 19.42 years and a standard deviation of 4.03 years. With respect to ethnic background, 75 of the participants were Caucasian, 52 African American, 4 Hispanic, 1 Native American, and 1 Puerto Rican. Eight additional respondents failed to identify their ethnicity. Participants were asked to complete a computerized questionnaire, consisting of

demographic questions, the Hurt Dispositions Scale (Negel, 2002), and measures of social adjustment and psychological well-being (e.g., Harter Self Perception Profile Global Self-Worth and Social Acceptance Scales, Beck Anxiety Inventory, and Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale).

Measures

Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck et al., 1988). This 21-item inventory is designed to measure overall symptoms of anxiety in adults and older adolescents. Respondents are asked to choose the response which best represents them on a four-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety. Internal consistency has been reported as ranging from .92 to .94, while item-to-total correlations range from .30 to .71.

Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D was developed to measure depressive symptomatology (i.e., depressed mood, feelings of guilt and worthlessness, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, psychomotor retardation, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbance) in the general population (Radloff, 1977). The CES-D is comprised of 20 items rated four-point scale, indicating the frequency of occurrence. Higher scores denote a greater number of depressive symptoms. Radloff (1977) found high internal consistency for the CES-D in both a general population sample ($\alpha = .85$) and a patient sample ($\alpha = .90$).

Hurt Dispositions Scale (HDS; Negel, 2002). The Hurt Dispositions Scale (HDS) was designed to measure two patterns of responses to hurt feelings: (1) introjective hurt disposition, which is characterized by internalizing the experienced hurt and blaming oneself for being hurt, and (2) retaliatory hurt disposition, which is characterized by lashing out angrily and aggressively against the perpetrator of the hurt. The HDS has been found to be both reliable and valid in previous studies (Negel, 2002). Specifically, introjective hurt reactivity proved to be reliable with a coefficient alpha of .92 and mean inter-item correlation of .38; for anacletic hurt, coefficient alpha = .91 and mean inter-item correlation = .35. Similarly, both the Introjective ($\alpha = .95$) and Retaliatory ($\alpha = .93$) scales of the HDS demonstrated high levels of internal reliability in the present study. Moreover, the HDS has demonstrated both convergent and discriminant validity through comparisons with personality measures of related concepts (e.g., guilt, vengeance, rejection sensitivity, etc.) and measures of individual well-being (e.g., self-esteem, depression).

Self-Perception Profile for College Students (SPP-CS; Harter, 1988). This 54-item instrument is designed to measure college students' judgments of their self-concept. The 13 domains represented include creativity, intellectual ability, scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, appearance, romantic relationships, social acceptance, close friendships, parent relationships, humor, morality, and global self-worth. Respondents are asked to pick one of four statements which best describes them. All subscales of the SPP-CS have yielded high levels of internal consistency and validity.

Results

Substantive Results

A series of correlational analyses revealed significant patterns of inter-relationships among the two hurt reactivity types and the various indices of social adjustment and psychological well-being (see Table 1). Specifically, introjective hurt reactivity was associated with higher self-reported levels of anxiety, depression, and retaliatory hurt and inversely related to feelings of self-worth and social acceptance. Retaliatory hurt evidenced a similar pattern of correlations with positive associations with anxiety and depression and inverse relationships with feelings of self-worth and social acceptance. Moreover, these two dispositional styles were significantly correlated with one another, $r = .51, p < .001$.

Table 1: Correlations between HDS and psychosocial adjustment measures

Variable	Introjective hurt	Retaliatory hurt
Anxiety	.40*	.33*
Depression	.51*	.47*
Global self-worth	-.45*	-.37*
Social acceptance	-.52*	-.27*

Note: $N = 141$. * $p < .01$. Anxiety (BAI; Beck et al., 1988); Depression (CES-D; Radloff, 1977); Global self-worth & Social acceptance (SPP-CS; Harter, 1988); Introjective & retaliatory hurt (HRS; Negel, 2002).

Stepwise regression analyses were utilized to assess which of the factors measured in the present study most affected psychological well-being and social adjustment (see Table 2). Results indicated that depression was best explained by anxiety, global self-worth, and retaliatory hurt, $F(3, 141) = 73.91, p < .01$. Conversely, depression was found to be the sole predictor of anxiety, $F(1, 141) = 100.29, p < .01$. Depression and introjective hurt predicted lower levels of global self-worth, $F(2, 141) = 52.48, p < .01$. Last, social acceptance was predicted by higher levels of self-worth and lower levels of introjective hurt reactivity and anxiety, $F(3, 141) = 17.74, p < .001$.

Exploratory Results

Two one-way ANOVAs were performed to assess potential gender differences in both introjective and retaliatory hurt reactivity. For introjective hurt reactivity, the responder's gender made a difference. Specifically, results indicated that female participants experienced higher levels of introjective hurt ($M = 56.51$) than their male counterparts ($M = 45$), $F(1, 141) = 13.65, p < .01$. No significant gender difference was evidenced in retaliatory hurt, $F(1, 141) = .02, ns$.

Discussion

As expected, both introjective and retaliatory hurt reactivity dimensions evidenced similar patterns of relationships with indices of psychological well-being and social adjustment. Specifically, both introjective and retaliatory hurt were associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression and lower levels of global self-worth and social acceptance. Moreover, the two

Table 2: Factors explaining psychological well-being and social adjustment

Variable	B	SE B	β
Anxiety			
Depression	.58	.06	.65**
Depression			
Anxiety	.48	.07	.43**
Global self-worth	– 6.17	.91	–.41**
Retaliatory hurt	.10	.04	.17**
Global self-worth			
Depression	–.04	.01	–.55**
Introjective hurt	–.01	.00	–.17*
Social acceptance			
Global self-worth	.36	.11	.27**
Introjective hurt	–.01	.00	–.22**
Anxiety	–.02	.01	–.18*

Note: Anxiety $R^2 = .42$; Depression $R^2 = .62$; Global self-worth $R^2 = .43$; Social acceptance $R^2 = .53$. ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$. Anxiety (BAI; Beck et al., 1988); Depression (CES-D; Radloff, 1977); Global self-worth & social acceptance (SPP-CS; Harter, 1988); Introjective & retaliatory hurt (HRS; Negel, 2002).

hurt dispositions were moderately, positively correlated with one another, indicating they are conceptually related yet distinct constructs. When the two were simultaneously analyzed, retaliatory hurt predicted greater amounts of depressive symptomatology; whereas introjective hurt accounted for greater variance in social acceptance and global self-worth. The latter finding is especially interesting in that it appears to support the idea suggested by the sociometer theory (Leary et al., 1998), which maintains that hurt feelings arise from the affective component of the sociometer. This suggests that hurt triggers negative affect derived from perceptions of negative evaluation. Thus, the more hurt one experiences, the more likely he or she is to feel a sense of social disapproval thereby causing a lowering of one's self-worth. Moreover, the finding of a gender difference for introjective hurt suggests that women are more likely to react in such an internalizing manner and thus may be at greater risk for self-doubt and depression.

The inherently sociable nature of human beings leaves people open to the possibility of being hurt and the subsequent inevitability of experiencing a broad range of hurtful experiences throughout our lives. This study presents a theoretical framework for understanding individual differences in experiencing and reacting to hurt and the relevance of those differences for social and psychological adjustment. Moreover, the bimodal theoretical approach to studying hurt feelings is differentiated from previous work on emotions in its use of everyday terminology to describe a universal experience instead of discrete emotions.

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